

From Reporting to Informing: Students and the Language of Assessment

Reporting is a hot topic in Canada today. It is important for parents to be informed about their child's learning and achievement in school. Many jurisdictions are revisiting their evaluation, grading, and reporting practices. In the past, the options were limited to report cards using a symbol system – codes such as A, B, 84%, 3 – that are sent home periodically. Parents and teachers meet to interpret the information and provide additional information face-to-face.

Things are changing. Today a printed report card and an online grading program have ceased to be the only or even best option for informing parents about student learning. Districts may still use online grading programs and other similar technology as part of their student management system but many are questioning their value in reporting to parents. It just doesn't make sense to limit the information flow to numerical data.

These days inexpensive, well-designed technology is making the flow of continuous, high quality information possible – e-Pearl from Concordia University is just one example. Students upload evidence of their learning such as work samples, audio and video recordings, self-assessments and so on. Peers, teachers, parents and others can view the evidence of learning and give feedback. In teachers' hands, these tools change the conversation because the evidence of learning no longer needs to be 'encoded' and available only 3 or 4 times a year. And, when students are deeply involved in the classroom assessment process, they have the language of assessment and are able to explain what they have learned and how they know they have learned it.

When one considers how curriculum across Canada has expanded in breadth and depth, it makes sense that reporting is moving beyond marks, numbers, and grades. Learning outcomes are complex. For example, most policy documents in Canada talk about evidence of student learning being triangulated – from multiple sources over time. Since evidence of learning is potentially anything a child does, says, or creates, it makes sense that students and teachers would find ways to use this evidence to demonstrate learning and achievement to parents as part of the reporting process. This way of thinking about evidence of learning helps ensure that teachers' professional judgments are both valid and reliable.

On April 12, 2014, during [Assessment for Learning: Canada in Conversation with the World](#), University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, [Michael Absolum](#) from New Zealand shared the following slide and talked about moving from Reporting to Informing. He talked about one of the projects in New Zealand where they have been working to support schools to accelerate learning through using assessment in the service of learning and shared [this video link](#).

School Initiatives - Changing the purposes

From Reporting	To Informing
Reporting to you, as parent, what your child has learnt/achieved	Sharing information and the understanding of that information
Focussed on success/failure/ learning of student	Focussed on supporting progress and achievement
Learning is not the purpose	Better learning by all is the purpose
Essentially a one-way message. Take it or leave it	Collaborating and co-constructing the way forward
Once or twice a year	Continuous and timely
From school to parent	Multi-layered and multi-directional with student, parent, whānau, teacher, school all in conversation
Technology improves the quality and richness of the information and of the information flows	

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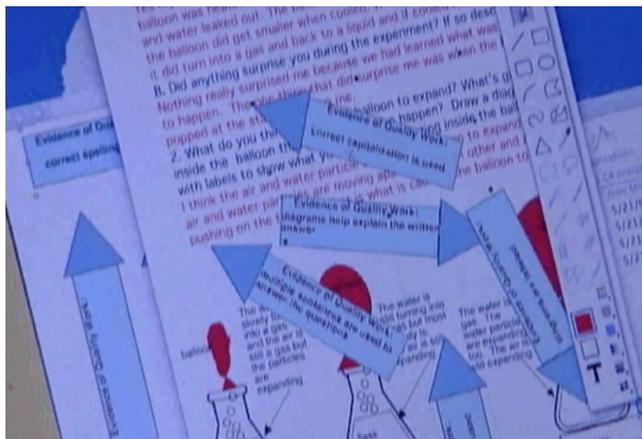


Notice the student's role in helping his parents know where he is in his learning and how they can help him learn. At one point the student talks about his responsibility to inform parents using evidence, "...anything to kind of prove, yes I can do this. This is an example of how I've done it." Michael Absolum summarized by noting that they saw a significant shift occurring when students were able to articulate the important ideas – when they could inform others about their learning.

As I listened, along with almost a hundred other Canadian educators, to this New Zealand account, I thought about similar experiences here in Canada. For example, colleagues and I

worked with a group of elementary schools on Vancouver Island. They were involving students in student-parent-teacher conferences in the early 1990s. The same comment turned up in that research – when students knew the language of assessment and could provide evidence of their own learning, everything changed (Davies et al, 1992). It was a ‘game-changer’ because suddenly students had the language to articulate what they had learned, what they needed to learn, and their learning goals. They could be partners in the reporting process. Students were more specific and were able to show their learning more thoroughly than the report card alone. School leadership noted that parents responded in very powerful and positive way. One school reported that over a seven-year period parents' approval ratings on surveys were consistently over 97%.

Another example is Lisa McCluskey (2002), an early childhood educator working in Edmonton who deliberately supported students to ‘learn the language of assessment.’ In one video clip Sarah, a five-year-old student, describes what writers at different points in their writing development do. Sarah says, as she points to one of the writing samples, “This is where I am. I sound it out. I try to keep them nicely written. I try to make the right words. I try to keep the letters with a space before they start. And I’m going over here (pointing to the next writing sample in the continuum).” This is a powerful example of students learning the language of assessment. This is what enables students to become partners in the assessment process.



And, this work isn't only being done in elementary schools. Lisa Hogan, a secondary Science teacher, describes how students self-assess. One of her Grade 8 students says, “We’re supposed to tell her what quality work it is – whether we think it is high quality work or low quality work. She needs to see why we think that. So those arrows, we move them to where we think the quality work is and type in the arrow what the quality work is. Here I have complete sentences. Over here I use correct punctuation and spelling. Just so she knows we know what we’ve done is quality work.”

As I reflect on students learning the language of assessment, I think about how important it is. Whether you consider self-regulation, co-regulation, meta-cognition, student-involved moderation of work samples, self-assessment, peer assessment, embedded formative assessment, motivation, engagement, instructional rubrics, or some other aspect of deep student involvement in the assessment process, it is clear. Language is the great connector. Students need to learn the language of assessment. And this means they need to be taught.

One of the best ways to teach students the language of assessment – the language of learning – is to co-construct criteria with them and involve them in examining samples of work to better understand quality. When teachers deliberately and with intention make time to ask students to select samples of work and compare the work to the criteria asking, “How does your work meet the criteria? How does it not yet meet the criteria? What will you do differently next time?” (Gregory et al, 2011) students learn more and learn the language of assessment. And, students are able to use the language of assessment to inform others about their learning.

Instead of simplifying the evidence of learning to mere quantitative measures, the evidence is expanded to show more of the learning. The qualitative evidence – the messy stuff – can be included because students are also involved. And

that evidence of learning can be used to show ‘proof’ of what students know, where they are in their learning, what they’re learning next, and what help is needed to make a difference (Herbst & Davies, 2014).

And technology, instead of limiting the information to numerical data, “improves the quality and richness of the information and helps the information flow” (Absolum, 2014). Reporting becomes transformed as students work with teachers to ‘report’ their learning to parents.

All my best,

Anne

PS A word of caution though - the best way to change report cards is very carefully and very collaboratively. If you are a leader considering making changes to the reporting process and report cards, I recommend you spend some time with the ideas in [Leading the Way to Assessment for Learning: A Practical Guide](#) and [Transforming Schools and Systems Using Assessment: A Practical Guide](#) (see references below).

References

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